

# Employee Silence Is Not Always Consent

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## *Abstract*

*This article explores the relationship between (employee) silence and knowledge transfer, which has not been adequately examined. Employee silence is the willful withholding of important work related information. This article analyzes the relationship between silence and knowledge transfer and addresses the leadership causes and operational consequences associated with employee silence. We explore the conditions under which knowledge transfer occurs in organizations and the consequences of ineffective knowledge transfer. In conclusion we propose several methods for measuring and eradicating cultures of silence and tested methods to sustain cultures of voice.*

When your employees are silent — when you aren't hearing any ideas or complaints — it might mean that they are busy and engaged. But it might also mean that some critical communication channels — the ones that move information that would improve processes and stimulate innovation — are blocked. Worst-case scenario, employee silence might be threatening your organization's survival.

This article sheds new light on the silence phenomenon in organizations. It addresses the causes and consequences associated with employee silence and implications for knowledge transfer which is a key competitive advantage. The article is based on reliable, rigorous research, and will further your understanding of the relationship between employee silence and knowledge transfer in organizations and improve your ability to encourage a culture of voice.

Consider the following three incidents.

Alan is a senior executive in a global financial service organization. He describes a time period at work this way: “Our new company executive vice president was firing people, literally just firing people that I had worked with in the past, and I had always thought these employees were very good at what they did. Others tried to challenge the new executive in terms of what he was doing, and boom, they were gone. So I just tried to avoid her/him at all costs. [Once, she/he] came to a senior staff meeting and said, ‘We are going to do this and that’, and then went around the room and asked everybody for their opinions. But at that point, I felt that no good was going to come from an honest opinion. I felt that at some point, the vice president’s actions would be noticed and he would be out of here. So in the meantime, if he said the sky is grey and was really blue, then you said, ‘Yes, it’s grey.’ Eventually, he did leave. But it took years to course-correct. Productivity was in the toilet. Nobody wanted to get involved.”

Jennifer, an MBA, is an information technology manager in a higher education institution. In her words: “I brought up a situation to my boss. I explained the issue and how I would go about solving it. She said, ‘Okay, will you write it up for me – it’s a really good idea.’ So, I write it up and in the next big meeting, she announces that she has an idea to solve the XYZ problem, and guess whose idea she presents? Mine! Next, she took the idea to her boss and several levels above, and this great idea now becomes her idea. I have been told in the past not to refute anything my boss says in public. So, in that instant, I decided to remain silent. In fact, I disengaged completely.”

The S.S. Titanic struck an iceberg and sank on its maiden voyage on April 15, 1912, killing 1,517 of the 2,223 people who had been on board. Incredibly, the Titanic had just 20 lifeboats, not nearly enough to accommodate the passengers and crew. Perhaps more incredibly, the ship was legally compliant: the number of lifeboats that a ship was required to have was based on the gross register tonnage of a ship rather than on the number of people who would be aboard.

In the Senate testimony given after the disaster, Joseph Bruce Ismay, Chairman of the White Star Line and Titanic’s owner, admitted that the company’s senior leaders hadn’t paid much attention to the issue.<sup>1</sup> He stated that in production meetings, “We discussed the colors of the first class carpet for 3 hours and the lifeboat capacity issue for 15 minutes.” This despite the fact that some engineers had long suspected the ship could sink under certain circumstances. Why hadn’t those engineers sounded a forceful warning? Examination of the Senate testimonials reveals that engineers were put off by White Star Line leaders’ attitudes.

In the three depicted scenarios, important information is willfully withheld and is characterized by the phenomenon called employee silence.<sup>2</sup>

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The stories of Alan and Jennifer show what a culture of silence looks like from the employee point of view. The Titanic is an extreme case of what can happen when employee silence goes undetected. However, in all three cases, valuable work-related knowledge was not transferred when it should have moved at lightning speed.

If management knew how Alan and Jennifer felt and had the best interests of the organization at heart, would management behave differently? Would Ismay and others responsible for signing off on the Titanic's safety requirements acted differently if they knew they were working in a fateful culture of silence? Of course they would have. But that is the thing about employee silence, it is difficult to identify until it is too late.

The challenge for practitioners and leaders is to understand the causes and consequences of employee silence and knowledge transfer, recognize the symptoms of silence, reduce or eliminate the kinds of leadership practices that elicit silence, and develop and demonstrate practices that encourage and sustain a culture of voice.

### **Our Research**

Much has been written about "knowledge transfer" in organizations, specifically the idea of "sharing best practices."<sup>3</sup> However, based on our research and experience as consultants and practitioners in several global organizations, the terms sounded more like platitudes than the root cause of two critically important organizational phenomena; corporate silence and knowledge transfer. We decided to get past the jargon used by organizations and explore the topics of corporate silence and knowledge transfer and wave important information in the right direction.

To do so, we conducted a national survey of 400 managers at companies ranging in size from 60,000 employees to fewer than 3,000 in industries from manufacturing to financial services. We reviewed research on transformational leadership, abusive leadership, knowledge strategy, and knowledge management, including the works of Bernard Bass,<sup>4</sup> Bruce Avolio and Gardner,<sup>5</sup> Francis Milliken,<sup>6,7</sup> and James McGregor.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, we identified a concept we call "employee silence," and focused on the definition, how it impedes the flow of information, and articulating its opposite: a culture of voice.

### **Summary of Silence Research**

Our research explored the relationship between the silence phenomenon and knowledge transfer process a key competitive advantage in organizations. Currently, not enough is known about this relationship. The

individual comprehensive silence experience descriptions and the knowledge transfer implications were critical to this research.

Our research showed that silence is primarily caused by leader-employee interactions especially when the employee experiences the leaders actions as egregious (e.g. berating in public, taking credit for ones ideas). Research participants reported questioning their personal value system (self-doubt) and eventually, “give up” (surrender affect) and acquiesced due to external forces requiring the leader to remain on the job (“I need this job because I’m the primary breadwinner”). One consequence that should concern any policy maker is discretionary effort.<sup>9</sup> Discretionary effort, which is elastic, is the amount of extra performance given by employees above what their job requires for success. Research participants reported a contraction in discretionary effort in response to their interaction. Most leaders reported reduced initiative and retreat from further idea generation and initiative either to retaliate (Offensive Silence) or to stay safe (Defensive Silence). Lastly, study participants reduced their organizational commitment and in many cases reduced their peer level interactions.

### **Causes and Recognition of Employee Silence**

Employee silence is either offensive (“I’m not going to speak up to help you. I don’t have your back because I don’t think you have mine”) or defensive (“I would be crazy to speak up. They shoot the messenger here,”) or, (“It’s futile to speak up, so why bother?”). Employees are unlikely to disclose their silence to you, the leader. What’s more, if you, as a leader, are genuinely trying to do your best for the company, it’s not likely that you will be able to recognize whether you’re unwittingly sending a message, that keeps employees from speaking up. That’s why you need to understand the root causes of destructive employee silence, the impact on knowledge transfer and recognize the symptoms.

### **Causes**

Ultimately, a culture of silence (or its positive opposite, a culture of voice) boils down to how employees receive and perceive a leader’s actions and the organizational processes and symbols that have been put in place. A place to start understanding employee silence is with your own actions and the beliefs and values that drive them.

Think of the perception of leadership behavior as a hierarchy of observable behaviors, attitudes, and (underlying) values and beliefs.

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Your belief system explains how you see the world and what you believe to be true about it. Your beliefs and values drive your attitudes, which in turn drive your observable behavior. Your behavior impacts how your associates experience, perceive and brand your leadership.

For example, take “control.” You may value control because you believe that it is your responsibility, as a leader, to keep others’ work in check in order to ensure that your function meets its goals. As a result, you may be less inclined to accept alternate views presented by employees. You may also establish a “tall hierarchy,” characterized by a vertical reporting structure with multiple management layers, which, by definition, places distance between management and employees. That distance, over time, can foster beliefs among management that employees are unreliable and untrustworthy. Following that path, if you come to believe that “giving employees an inch means they will most likely take a mile,” then you are likely to value control even more, and you are also likely to behave in ways that reflect those values. You may require frequent status reports, or hold daily update meetings, or retain ultimate decision-making control. To carry the example further, status reports may, in this scenario, become an organizational symbol that reinforces employee silence in your workplace.

The issue isn’t whether status reports are good or bad. The issue is the underlying belief that drives your need for status reports and frequent check-ins with your associates. This belief, if unchecked, can drive behaviors that have undesirable and or unanticipated consequences for your employees—like feeling micro-managed.

Consider one senior-level manager at a publically held global manufacturer. On the surface, driving results and controlling projects seemed like a part of her job. She often boasted about her work ethic and “drive for results.” However, her employees had been burning out and resentful of the lack of autonomy and overt micromanagement. This leader discovered that her beliefs, values, and behaviors actually stemmed from being the oldest child growing up in a household with two working parents. The responsibility for her siblings had rested on her shoulders, and she had worked very hard to keep everything together for them. She learned at a young age that control was her saving grace and kept her siblings safe, and she brought that (formed) perspective into her adult life and into work.

Within a few weeks of this realization, and without deliberate intent on her part, her behaviors began to change, and her employees (slowly) began to speak up more than they had in the past. Overall, within a few months, productivity was improving at a faster pace than before. Based on this understanding she began to explore ways to separate the behaviors that

worked in the past from those in her current work life that had become a liability.

If you value structure and control, and your employees crave that direction, so much the better. But if you value structure and control, and your employees, especially millennials, are motivated by autonomy, the disparity between manager practices and employees needs could create tension and unresolved conflict.

### Recognition of Silence

We suggest that employee silence is a “state-of-being,” not a “trait phenomenon.” Silence is about an environment or culture created by interactions between leaders and employees. It is a social phenomenon that’s often caused by leader practices that employees perceive to be unjust or egregious.<sup>10</sup>

How, then, can you tell if your employees are silent? Start by asking yourself the following questions (and by having other managers throughout the organization do the same). Your responses may indicate signs of silence.

1. How many employees, in the last month, presented a solution to a problem when you didn’t have a solution to offer?
  - a. How did you respond?
  - b. How did they respond to you?
2. In how many staff meetings, within the last six months, did you get the “Bovine Stare”—a blank look—from the group when you asked people to give you their opinions and views?
  - a. How did you respond?
  - b. How did they respond to you?
3. Who were the employees, within the last week, to call you or show up at your office (unsolicited) with a new idea?
  - a. How did you respond?
  - b. How did they respond to you?
4. Within the last week, who were the employees that openly disagreed with you?
  - a. How did you respond?
  - b. How did they respond to you?

Your answers to the questions above may indicate that you are operating in a culture of silence. Organizations with cultures of voice tend to embrace

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and encourage innovation and change and successfully implement ideas, products, and services in the market for which it serves. To what extent do your leadership practices elicit silence or encourage voice?

Often, at an enterprise level, organizations claim a desire to empower their employees through a policy statement with the intention of increasing employee commitment. For example, a manager may claim to have an “open door policy.” But in reality, the door, although physically open, is virtually closed.

Take question three, for example. Suppose a direct report came to you this past week with process improvement idea. Suppose you didn’t like the idea and considered it “half-baked.” To be “nice,” you thanked the individual for his/her input and said that you would look into the idea, even though you had no intention of doing so. The good news is that your employee was willing to come to you with an idea. The bad news is that by leaving it hanging, you’ve sent an implicit message that the employee’s idea had little merit and really wasn’t worth your time. Consequently, the next time that employee has an idea; he or she may be a little bit reluctant to bring it to you. You have inadvertently seeded a culture of silence.

Many managers believe that organizational conformity and cohesion is a sign of strength and that conflict and disagreement is a sign of weakness and should be avoided and “managed”—that is, eliminated. If that’s the case, then they have no intention of acting on employees’ feedback if it doesn’t support current managerial practices, views, and opinions. However, as a result, employees will begin to express their dissent to other audiences regardless of their ability to act on the feedback. They will talk to one another; they may even take their feedback to social media channels.

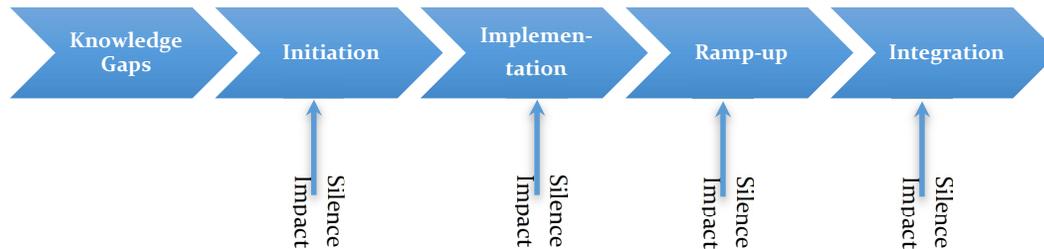
Lastly, employees will voice contrary views, including open disagreement, only when they are certain that there is no risk of retaliation. Our research led us to pursue the underexplored relationship between corporate silence and knowledge transfer, which is discussed next.

### **Silence as a Hindrance to the Knowledge Transfer Process**

Knowledge transfer is not an act but rather a process that depends on the disposition and ability of the source (employee) and the recipient (employee) of the knowledge.<sup>11</sup> We now turn our focus on the knowledge source and examine silence as a potential hindrance to the transfer of knowledge through discourse. Research outlines four distinct phases related to knowledge transfer (initiation, implementation, ramp-up, and integration).<sup>12</sup> Additionally, we added a Knowledge Gap phase to characterize the identification of a knowledge deficit. Also, we indicate where silence can

impact knowledge transfer. The knowledge transfer flow and silence impact are depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Five Phases of Knowledge Transfer and the Silence Impact



### ***Initiation***

This stage of the knowledge transfer process entails all actions and events leading up to the transfer. For example, it may include the efforts of an organization to identify the gaps in its current knowledge strategies as well as the coordinating actions to identify the requisite knowledge required to mitigate gap effects. Silence, we propose, increases the difficulty associated with search strategies. Assuming that an employee (knowledge source) is a willing participant, we believe, the silent employee will not adequately articulate knowledge surrounding existing operations. The silent employee, as the source of knowledge, will not freely communicate pertinent measures of performance within his or her unit.

### ***Implementation***

Once a relevant knowledge gap has been identified and adequate search strategies are formulated to address the perceived deficiency, the implementation phase of knowledge transfer begins.<sup>13,14</sup> In this phase, resource flow between the (employee) source and (employee) recipient is critical. Activities related to implementation slow after the (employee) recipient begins using the knowledge.

This phase will see increased resource flow and therefore issues associated with transfer and knowledge boundaries may surface. Silence, we believe, will complicate the implementation of knowledge.<sup>15,16</sup> Silent employees may not readily voice issues associated with operational processes, interpretations, and goals. Lessons learned during previous transfers must be shared with recipient employees. Individuals, who willfully withhold valuable insights, could cause barriers to the implementation phase of knowledge transfer.

### ***Ramp-up***

Here, the (knowledge recipient) employee begins using the knowledge. This stage of the transfer process is heavily dependent upon problem identification and problem solving.<sup>17,18</sup> The proposed issues of silence at this stage are with the (knowledge recipient) business unit. The absorptive capacity of the recipient depends on the existing knowledge inventory and skills (source). Therefore, individuals must voice concerns and findings associated with the transferred knowledge. Employee silence contributes to the causal ambiguity, excess costs and delays associated with the ramp-up phase.<sup>19,20</sup>

### ***Integration***

Although knowledge use becomes part of the organization's routines, it can cause disruptive conflict. While conflict may be beneficial to knowledge creation, silence, we propose, will create unnecessary obstacles to knowledge integration. When obstacles are encountered and unresolved, organizations can respond with threat rigidity by reverting back to their known and more predictable conditions (status-quo).<sup>21</sup> Successful integration depends on an organization's ability to remove obstacles and commit to an inter-organizational truce.<sup>22</sup> Removing or disciplining employees who are at the center of disruptive conflict may not be a viable solution if the root cause of the disruption (silence) is not identified.<sup>23</sup> Unlike more overt obstacles, employee silence by its very nature is difficult to identify and correct without the requisite knowledge to recognize symptoms and antecedent conditions.

### **Reducing or Eliminating Practices that Elicit Silence**

Recent research showed that 93 percent of respondents in a wide-ranging study claim that their immediate supervisor strongly influences voice behavior and contribute both positive and negative voice perceptions.<sup>24</sup> Detert and Trevino find that, "Supervisors contribute to positive voice perceptions when they are open, empathic, tolerant and composed; they negatively contribute to voice perceptions when they are perceived as abusive, closed, or unwilling to accept mistakes."<sup>25</sup>

How can you influence your employees' perceptions? Start by examining your learning orientation. Think of learning orientation as a continuum with two extremes: a confirming orientation, which is basically a, "*I know everything*" mindset, and a curious orientation, which is basically a, "*I have everything to know*" mindset. To encourage voice, you will need to show employees that you are more oriented to being curious than confirming.

What is your default learning orientation? Where on the continuum do you tend to reside? To find out, ask yourself the following questions:

1. How many times in the last 2 months have you solicited input from your employees for operational improvements in your business area?
  - a. If your employees openly suggest operational improvement ideas, what could it say about your management effectiveness?
2. How many times have you specifically solicited a “contrary viewpoint” in a group meeting where one idea seemed dominant?
  - a. How did they respond?
3. How many times in the past month have you asked and learned from a direct report about a topic that you know less about than they do?

### Something to Try Now

Regardless of your starting point, there is room for improvement. Here are three exercises that may help:

1. Call a meeting with your direct reports. If you have more than ten direct reports, then hold two small meetings. There is safety in smaller numbers. In larger groups, there is tendency for what is known as Social Silence. This occurs when group members scan the group for the popular and common idea and stick to it. If their idea is unique and if the norm is to “go with the flow”, then associates tend to assume that their idea might be flawed because no one else has presented it. This logic can be a fatal flaw in the innovation and decision-making processes. Put this question on the table: “If you could change one thing that we do right now, what would it be?”

Ask each of them to respond. If you get something that looks like a bovine stare in response (that is, if they look at you blankly and no one says anything), wait it out. Try counting to 45 silently to yourself to allow time for someone to speak up. If no one contributes after that time, ask him or her to write down his or her responses. After a few moments, ask them to read what they wrote to the group. Listen without judgment. That is, when you hear an idea – stop and listen to it. If you don’t like it, hold your judgment. Instead of stating what is wrong with the idea, ask how the associate thinks it will work? Learn as much as you can by asking open-ended questions. Ask questions to learn, not to interrogate. An inquisition or judgment is a sure way to shut down the flow of information when you want to stimulate it instead. For example, if you hear an idea that seems half-baked, use build-up language to get to a better solution. To exemplify, a comment such as “Here’s what I like about that idea. How can we implement that so that it doesn’t impact IT or client reporting” will encourage further thought and conversation. In this way, you are learning, not judging. You are stimulating

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conversation rather than shutting it down. Never tear down the idea or criticize it, especially in a public forum.

Schedule a follow-up meeting at an agreed-upon time not to exceed four weeks. This will keep the ideas alive and signal importance. Before the follow up meeting, though, make sure you follow up with each member of the group individually. If one of them has made a suggestion that you are not going to implement, this step is particularly important. You are on the hook to go back to the author. Explain what you liked about their idea, the decision-making criteria, and the reason for the outcome. Strongly encourage and explicitly seek that person's input again. You can acknowledge the decision-making criteria publicly because if everyone heard the suggestion, they all have an expectation about the outcome and your response. Your response becomes a micro-legend that tells the associate culture whether it's safe or risky to make suggestions to you in a public forum.

If you find a suggestion that you think will work, it's time for some self-reflection and insights. This is critical for you to understand what actions you wish to repeat and which ones need upgrades to improve the flow of knowledge and encourage a culture of voice. After the follow-up meeting, ask yourself: "What specifically did I do differently? What was the result? Have I observed any unusual behaviors since we held that first meeting? What might those behaviors indicate? What have I learned about myself?"

2. Try this same type of exercise with regard to changes that your associates might like to see at the organization-wide level. Try using formal and informal voice mechanisms to encourage ideas for change. In your next staff meeting, ask your direct reports to write down two to three things that should be changed by senior management that would improve how things get done. Collect the items and list them for everyone to see. You will need to get an agreement from the group on which items require focus and further exploration and implementation. Your organization can't do everything; so getting agreement from the group members on priority items increases their commitment level. So, ask for an agreement on the top two or three priority items that will make the biggest improvement to the business. Voting for the priority items is the best way to see where the energy is in the group.

3. The next time an associate discusses a problem, ask what they believe to be the cause. Ask "why" at least three times to increase the likelihood that you get to the root cause. Listen without judgment. That means, when you hear a response with which you disagree, instead of declaring your disagreement, ask an open-ended question to learn more about the solution. For example, if your associate says, "We should really stop shipping non-

value added reports to clients”, you may think to yourself, “Well, we can’t just stop sending these reports– what if someone relies on them?” Instead of declaring this conclusion, ask questions like these to uncover the root cause of the problem.

- Why is this issue important to you?
- How would report termination work?
- How will we know who relies on the reports and who doesn’t?

People usually avoid the doctor when they’re not sick. But most would agree that annual checkups are important to ensure that there’s nothing troubling “under the radar.” Explicitly testing the culture in your business unit with an exercise such as this is similar to a check-up. You may not need it. But then again, you may not know how much you needed it until after you do it.

### **Towards Voice**

One significant benefit of voice is that knowledge transfer accelerates, resulting in increased knowledge capital. For employees, a culture of voice means that there is no risk associated with open disclosure. When employees perceive a potential threat to open disclosure they will avoid the threat and are likely to remain silent instead. The “risk” associated with voice and therefore knowledge transfer is usually the result of seeing or hearing a peer pay a price for voicing an opinion or viewpoint. You can combat this reality by removing all negative responses in your control when your employees speak up. A negative response can reduce the likelihood that others will voice their views. Your response to employees’ views and opinions is interpreted and socialized in a nano-second. Socialization occurs in the form of story telling. These stories can be legendary, they shape your leadership brand and ultimately, the culture. One way to create a legend is to throw yourself into the fray when you witness another leader (peer) “shooting the messenger” or engaging in other behaviors that elicit silence. Intervene if possible. Refocus the attention on the relevant information and express your gratitude to the messenger. This intervention can increase voice behavior and knowledge transfer.

Research has shown the benefits of knowledge transfer. Employees access and use knowledge to generate new knowledge that can result in competitive advantage.<sup>26</sup> The digital age and organizational complexity requires high levels of agility, innovation, idea generation and strengthening that results in sustainable competitive advantage.<sup>27</sup> And, as we’ve seen, the organizational social dynamics can enable or restrict knowledge transfer. Armed with an understanding of how a culture of silence comes to be and how to identify it

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and disarm it, you can begin to create an environment in which relevant information gets where it needs to go precisely when it needs to be there.

The six themes uncovered in our silence and knowledge transfer research are summarized in the Eight Realities and Recommendations section below. Each Reality was constructed by integrating our findings in the two disciplines. We then constructed corresponding recommendations that can help leaders move their organizations from a culture of silence toward a “culture of voice. As a result, knowledge transfer for the purposes of more informed decision-making, problem solving and innovation practices, increases. The eight realities and recommendations are described below.

### **The Eight Silence Realities and Recommendations**

*Reality 1:* A leader’s belief that non-conforming views expressed by employees constitutes dissent will silence employees and slow the pace of knowledge transfer via discourse.

*Recommendation:* Build up ideas rather than tear them down. Treat every idea, even the ones that you perceive as “half-baked,” as the next best idea ever imagined. Ask yourself, “What do I like about this idea?” Use that positive component and build up the idea. State your dislikes as “concerns” and ask the idea generator, “how they will address” each of the concerns you have with the idea. The build up process signals to other followers that it is safe to offer ideas and information, even though it may not be strong.<sup>28</sup>

*Reality 2:* Employees will not engage in discourse for the purposes of knowledge transfer when the leader discourages the expression of minority views and opinions.

*Recommendation 2:* Group members usually protect and advance the most commonly held ideas. When the minority view holder scans the group environment and determines that their view/idea is not common or discussed, they are unlikely to express it. To make it safe for the minority view holder to disclose, ask the group, “Who sees this problem differently?” You should allow for approximately 30 seconds of silence. If there is a minority view among the group, this will help to uncover it. If you make a habit of this practice, you will help your organization move closer to a culture of voice that will speed up knowledge transfer.

*Reality 3:* Knowledge transfer occurs in organizations under the direction of an open, transformational leadership style more than it will under an

autocratic leadership style. Leader behavior is a significant contributing factor to a culture of silence.

*Recommendation 3:* Try to demonstrate one democratic leadership practice within the next 21 days. We recommend delegating a decision that you usually make but could be made or influenced by those it affects. Track the decision quality. If it is better than the one you would have made, congratulations. If it does not measure up, use “build-up language” described in Recommendation 1 to strengthen the idea and the self-esteem of those who recommended it. If you do this well, you should experience more idea generation from your team members.

*Reality 4:* Gaps in the flow of knowledge can't be identified or assessed in a culture of silence. (In other words, you won't know what you're missing.)

*Recommendation 4:* The next time you get the bovine stare from team members, ask, “What does the silence mean?” Wait for 30 seconds before moving on. If you get no response, ask the same question in a one on one meeting with a direct report. Eventually you will find out how you may be contributing to the silence or the root cause of the silence issue.

*Reality 5:* Employee silence will compromise the information quality and quantity between managers and employees, among the various levels within a function, and the various functions within the organization.

*Recommendation 5:* Practice more drawing out of others than telling them what and how to do things. Remember the 20/80 rule, talk and tell approximately 20 percent of the time when idea generating and problem solving; listen and draw out 80 percent of the time. The amount of information you hear and learn may surprise you.

*Reality 6:* Employee silence is associated with excess costs and delays in the ramp-up phase of any initiative.

*Recommendation 6:* knowledge moves quickly in organization's that have a culture of voice. During this critical phase of transfer, challenge your own leadership learning orientation. Are you more curious about issues and problems than you are certain of causes and potential solutions? You should ask your associates more than you tell them. We call this the 20/80 Rule. Ask and draw others out 80% of the (problem solving) time, tell others what you think and want 20% of the (problem solving) time.

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*Reality 7:* Employee silence threatens the routinization of new knowledge by slowing it down or causing a reversion to status quo.

*Recommendation 7:* A reversion to status quo can signify a threat whereby problem-solving groups tend to reject members with outlying views and opinions. Resist the temptation of comfort in conformity. As the leader, you should be in constant pursuit of non-conforming ideas and reward those who are brave enough to disclose. Encouraging a culture of voice means that those who disclose must feel safe doing so and that their voice has merit.

*Reality 8:* Without an understanding of the antecedents of employee silence, it cannot be detected as a root cause of problem-solving and innovation deficiencies.

*Recommendation 8:* Silence is measurable and should be assessed yearly to determine whether Offensive, Defensive, or Social silence exists in your organization.

### **Summary**

Employee silence can effect each phase of the knowledge transfer process. Employee silence can impede the identification of a knowledge gap, which can prevent an organization from initiating actions to close it. Silence can slow the integration process by preventing critical source knowledge to pass to recipients. The absence of critical knowledge in the integration phase could cause unresolved difficulties that result in delays and cost over runs that result in a reversion to the status quo.

The study of knowledge transfer and silence have been examined separately which has left a void in the organizational literature that explores the relationship between silence and knowledge transfer in innovation oriented organizations. This article explores the relationship by examining the antecedents to effective knowledge transfer and silence separately. Organizational complexity requires rapid knowledge transfer, agility, innovation, idea generation enabled by a culture of voice and that results in sustainable competitive advantage.

Leaders can influence the pace and depth of knowledge transfer by recognizing and addressing the signs of silence and developing practices that encourage cultures of voice.

### Authors

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### Endnotes

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